

# Public libraries in the Roman world

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Many of us use libraries virtually every working day, and we tend to see them as little more than book-stores – sometimes purely functional, sometimes visually appealing as well. But quite apart from being the home of literary works which we still read and study today, ancient public libraries can tell us a great deal about the cultures and societies which paid for, designed and used them. Financing and constructing magnificent buildings to adorn the cities of the empire was a major task for the wealthy élites of the Roman empire. Local aristocrats were encouraged to turn their resources of time and money to the improvement of the fabric of their cities in the hope of winning local, and perhaps eventually imperial, favour. The pattern for this process of aristocratic urban adornment, or ‘euergetism’, was set at the highest possible level: at the top of the heap was the supreme patron, the emperor himself, and the building projects he undertook in Rome and across the empire gave the lead to thousands of public minded emulators. An interesting project for an ancient historian, then, is a study of what the emperor hoped to achieve through his own building projects, and how these aims and projects were copied on a smaller, local scale: The public library makes a good case-study, since it not only makes a bold statement about the image the donor wants to project; it also tells us something about the intellectual life of the town where it is built, or at least about the way in which the town wants to be perceived among its neighbours.

## Reading in private: reading in public

Libraries had a long history in the ancient world by the time emperors started building them in Rome. In the Greek world, the Hellenistic monarchs like the Ptolemies of Alexandria, the Attalids of Pergamum, and the Seleucids of Antioch were the first to attempt systematic collection of large numbers of books into institutional libraries. Some of these Greek book collections moved west with conquering Roman armies, and scholars followed them. An ever-growing community of literary bees buzzed around the honey-pot of patronage and resources created in the capital of the empire.

As Rome grew in size and wealth, the establishment of public libraries became an attractive goal for leading politicians there: building equivalents to the kingly libraries of the east would suit Rome’s dignity as a capital of empire, and the chance to win popular favour and even to gain a degree of control over the production and reading of literature were substantial prizes. The first recorded plan for a public library in Rome was begun by Julius Caesar. His death put the project on hold; a few years later, Asinius Pollio and then Augustus himself presided over a series of three early imperial libraries. Where Augustus set a pattern for urban adornment, later emperors often followed: by about A.D. 300 catalogues of buildings in the city of Rome list 28 different libraries, ranging from the grand, marble buildings in imperial fora to temple libraries to (probably) book collections for the general public in bath houses.

## Libraries as a waste of space?

What did these libraries look like, and how did they work? The

remains of several public libraries have been excavated, and a fairly typical design emerges (though caution is needed here – sometimes library-like buildings could be put to completely different uses, and some ‘libraries’ are disputed). The most common design for a public library was a rectangular room with a doorway on one wall, and a series of niches built into the remaining three sides. In the Roman world books were written on scrolls of papyrus, which were rolled up and placed on wooden shelves which in turn were set into the niches. By modern standards, and compared to earlier Greek libraries, this design was recklessly wasteful of space, but one important advantage was gained: the central floor area was left open. Sometimes archaeologists envisage tables and chairs here; it seems, though, that from the outset Roman public libraries were deliberately intended to provide space for large numbers of people to meet and discuss, reinforcing their public character. We hear of literary readings and debates in these spaces; Suetonius even records how the senate met in one of the libraries in the Palatine palace when Augustus’ illness prevented him from getting down to the forum.

Another clue about the way in which libraries were intended to function comes from their location and the materials used to build them. Libraries were often located in prestigious areas and finished in costly materials. Trajan’s libraries, for instance, occupy prime spots either side of the famous column. Marble slabs from Egypt and Numidia covered the floor and walls, and an internal colonnade in colourful marble supported a gallery to the upper levels. Clearly libraries were designed to make an impression on various levels, from delighting scholars and authors with their book collections, to impressing visitors with the richness of their decoration, to striking ordinary passers-by with their prominence and elaborate façades. Such ostentation was not confined to Rome. A provincial library of similar date to Trajan’s, that of Celsus in Ephesus in present-day Turkey, occupies a key position at the head of the town’s main street and carefully dominates its surroundings with a fabulous façade.

## Donating and imitating libraries

The fact that libraries across the empire share these characteristics brings us to the suggestion made at the outset, that the library presents an interesting case-study for the way in which the donation of public buildings was imitated around the empire. In the case of Trajan’s libraries (dedicated about A.D. 114), it seems that provincial donors in different parts of the empire saw the emperor’s gift to the city of Rome as an attractive model for their own, local activity – perhaps to win favour with the imperial court, perhaps simply to be seen to be following the current fashion, and perhaps to indicate that their own cities were worthy of the same sort of buildings as the imperial capital.

One such donor was a man who can be regarded as a reliable touchstone for imperial ‘policy’ in the age of Trajan. Pliny the Younger was consul in A.D. 100 and went on to be a provincial governor; the letters he wrote throughout his career carefully portray him as the ideal Trajanic senator – personally and politically loyal, generous, dedicated to the honourable pursuit of the offices and activities which was the duty of the aristocrat. Pliny’s

gift of a library to his home town of Comum, and the speech which he delivered at its dedication and then published in letter I.8, therefore signalled that libraries were an acceptable focus for the enthusiastic donor; Trajan's own project, inaugurated a few years later, confirmed this. Aristocrats looking for the right sort of project to spend their money on saw where imperial favour seemed to lie, and under Trajan and his successor Hadrian libraries sprang up in various cities – Antioch, Athens, Prusa, Sagalassos. The best known library from the Trajanic era is the one in Ephesus, mentioned above, which was built by the son of another ex-consul. It bears striking similarities to the libraries in Trajan's Forum; it even uses brick for the construction of the rear three walls, a device unique both in Trajan's Forum and in early second century Ephesus.

### **Preserving the past for the future**

Moreover, the ex-consul, Celsus, after whom the building is named, is buried within the library itself. We know from one of Pliny's letters that Celsus' unusual choice of location for his tomb was not unique: in Bithynia the orator Dio buried his wife and child in a library complex which also contained a statue to Trajan. The connection to the emperor is significant: Trajan himself may have been buried between the two libraries in his Forum, under the foot of the Column with its helical relief frieze of his military victories. Clearly the library seemed, for emperor and subjects alike, an appropriate place to commend oneself to posterity: there is a complicated series of mental associations at work here, linking the commemoration of a donor through lavish architecture, with the role of the library in transmitting the cultural values of an age to future generations, with choosing as a final resting place a building with a very public quality.

For those individual library builders whose work was at least in part prompted by the emperor's examples, further layers of significance combine. The provision of a library, like that of a bath house, theatre, or smart new temple, displayed a patron's affection for and pride in his own city; the similarity to imperial library projects, statues of the emperor, and inscriptions detailing the donor's military or political service to Rome display his attachment to the ruling regime. In library buildings, then, we can see the three-way blend that characterises so much of urban life in the Roman empire: imperial identity, local identity, and personal identity.

*Matthew Nicholls wrote this article in the new library of the British School at Rome, where (as far as he knows), no one is buried, although a ghost is said to roam. When he is not there, he can often be found in the library of St John's College, Oxford.*